

Beyond man as the measure of things

Review of *MOLD* by Jasper Delva in Etcetera, 28.06.2022.

Translated from Dutch: <https://e-tcetera.be/mold-sara-manente/>

In *MOLD*, the Italian choreographer Sara Manente has taken her inspiration from the twofold meaning of the English word 'mold', namely fungi and form. By means of a host of seemingly random objects, she has joined forces with Gitte Hendrickx and Marcos Simoes to create a quirky world beyond man as the measure of all things.

A dreamlike, meditative soundscape by Christophe Albertijn fills the space upon entering. A white, rectangular plastic tarpaulin is spread out on the stage. In one corner of that sheet is a white fountain on wheels. The water is made of silicone foam and the fountain has a very soft, almost inconspicuous jet. Three separate stands line the white tarpaulin lengthwise. The set-up is somewhat reminiscent of a sports match, were it not for the fact that two of the stands run through the white playing field, cutting a corner in the process.

The audience can choose where they sit, but that is less obvious than you might think. Indeed, several amorphous silicon objects already occupy a seat. Other objects hang from ropes above and between the stands. For example, brown-coloured spheres and a white worm-like, shape out of fabric dangle from the lighting installation above my seat. Above the stand next to me hangs a well-filled, black bin liner. On - or from? - that bag sprout various brown and white mushrooms, the fruiting bodies of fungi.

SHUFFLING PERRIER BOTTLES

Once everyone is seated, three performers appear. Their attire, an excess of oversized shorts, tank tops and beach sandals with socks, is sporty-casual and reminiscent of hip normcore style. Two of them, Gitte Hendrickx and Marcos Simoes, carry a bag. One is yellow, see-through and filled with empty plastic Perrier bottles, the other, made of a pink fabric, resembles a pillowcase and hides what's in it. Choreographer Sara Manente holds a single Perrier bottle while carrying a sleeping bag tied up with ropes over her shoulder.

Emotionless, the three shuffle to the centre of the white tarpaulin. They take off their slippers and a few items of clothing and empty their pockets. Simoes' knapsack also reveals several empty Perrier bottles. Then the performers begin to touch and manipulate the objects. Manente pushes and rolls a bottle across the floor. Her action fills the now silenced space with the shuffling sound that bottle makes rolling across the floor. Simoes follows, but by squeezing a bottle in the hollow of his knees. Then it is the turn of the sleeping bag, unrolled in the meantime. Hendrickx and Simoes rub it, use it as a kind of blanket and crawl over

and under it. At the same time, Manente makes his way through the audience to hang the rope of the sleeping bag from the lighting grid above a stand near the other objects.

Like the objects themselves, it is not easy to identify what the performers are doing or showing on stage. They primarily focus on the seemingly random objects. In addition to the Perrier bottles, other objects, including a flexible corrugated sheet, a swimming pool noodle and a golden can of hairspray, put in an appearance. The performers touch them, move them or rearrange them differently. For example, the trio collect the objects they were just handling on the sleeping bag and then roll it up into a ball, which they then suspend from a rope above the playing surface and which will remain in place for the duration of the performance, gently swaying back and forth. And so on. The spectators are left in the dark as to why.

FROM CONTENT TO MATERIALITY

What the performers are doing amounts to 'gathering up' their own bodies and the objects, no more no less. At the same time, they play about with the objects in their environment, both deliberately and aimlessly. The scenes thus created never acquire any meaning; they are always simply about the interaction between people and objects. Simoes, for example, suddenly starts break dancing with a baguette, while Manente and Hendrickx hang some amorphous objects and a frame on the wall. Simoes copies them and hangs his baguette next to it. You could see the genesis of art in it, but that seems entirely irrelevant. It sums up the performance: I try to read scenes and identify content, but even before I arrive at a possible interpretation, the next moment immediately erases any kind of accumulated meaning.

The only thing that seems to count is the dynamic between man and object. Time and again, the performers investigate and play with the objects that are available at that moment. Gradually, as a spectator, you feel your attention shifting. Where at first I was still looking for meaning and content, a different, more sensory experience gradually took over. I notice that I look at the objects differently, that I pay more attention to their specific materiality and the impact that they have in the space and with the performers. I no longer wonder what the role of the corrugated iron or the baguette might be in the story that cannot be worked out because there is none, but instead I think about why these objects, with these specific characteristics, are part of this performance.

THE INHERENT QUIRKINESS

Then suddenly, the atmosphere in the room turns. A techno-like beat fills the room. The cue for the performers to go completely wild. They jump and thrash around, each holding a stick. It is somewhat reminiscent of a relay race gone mad. Meanwhile, an amalgam of balls of cheese, the

corrugated iron and other seen and unseen objects are displayed on the white playing field. The bunched up sleeping bag is also still hanging there. The three of them dance around and between the objects, swapping the sticks for different objects. All these objects are added to the craftwork that is gradually taking shape on the floor. It goes on and on, for at least ten minutes, until even a ladder makes its appearance out of nowhere and is set up in a corner of the playing field.

I can't make sense of what's going on here, but that doesn't prevent me from having fun watching. Perhaps that is the great strength of *MOLD*, the elusiveness, the inherent quirkiness of it all. What I see and experience, I can hardly put into words, if at all. But in that moment when my language fails me, *MOLD* does something extraordinarily fascinating. It is luring me and forces me to focus entirely on the material idiosyncrasy of these often mundane objects.

This idiosyncrasy is also already reflected in the title of the performance. The English word 'mold' in fact refers to two very different things. On the one hand it is a mycelium or a fungus flake, the network of threads of a fungus that grows in a seemingly uncontrollable manner, colonises, infects and digests its environment. On the other hand, it refers to a mold or cast. Both logics, uncontrollable proliferation and controlled melding, are contained in the performance, but rarely, if ever, do you see them explicitly inspire scenes. It is always about the elusive, paradoxical interplay between the two.

TRANSFORMING LANDSCAPE

The quirky, yet affective, putting together of people and things that *MOLD* is about and that it also depicts is perhaps most clearly felt in one of the final scenes of the performance. The three performers gather around a rack full of canvases that has been positioned in a corner of the stage all along. They take it in turns to stand in front of the rack in the crucifix pose, while the others cover them with fabric. I catch myself digging yet again for meaning and finding nothing less than a religious ritual in it. I even go further and discover a genuine Mother Mary in Hendrickx, dressed in her new outfit. Or do they together make up the Three Kings? But then the three of them start running around the stage again, holding all manner of objects. Soon all I have eyes for is the way the canvases swing with the bodies on which they simply hang and the objects which those same bodies activate.

The world that *MOLD* thus creates is no longer a place where only the human subject continues to refer to, and celebrate, itself. Bodies and objects wander around the stage in unison and as equals. Together, they form an ever-changing landscape of touch and vibration, action and reaction, constellation and dislocation. *MOLD* thus shows not only that any object carries agency, which also defines and affects us. It simultaneously confronts the spectators with their persistent desire - or need even - to reduce those objects simply to their role in relation to human subjects. *MOLD* thus shows us an entangled, shadowy universe in

which the object is no longer limited, or framed, by the subject, but in which subject and object actually influence and shape each other in their material presence.

As such, *MOLD* dovetails into a flurry of performances, such as *Oblivion* (2015) by Sarah Vanhee, *Blab* (2017) by Sonja Jokiniemi or *New Skin* (2018) by Hannah De Meyer, which depict, rethink and re-evaluate material agency. *MOLD* is a successful attempt that builds on a world and experience beyond man as the measure of all things. The human subject is a little less relevant here for a while. I can already see in it a glimpse of the more durable relationship that we, as humans, will have to establish with our world.

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